Sensitive Area Survey

a lake management tool for critical habitat protection

***W**hat are lake sensitive areas?* Sites within or around lakes that have been designated as "sensitive" typically fall under one or two categories: an area might provide unique and/or critical ecological habitat; and/or it might have historical, geological, and/or archaeological significance.

Who conducts the sensitive area survey?

These surveys are an integrated approach to resource management because they utilize the expertise of many natural resource managers. A team of professionals such as fishery biologists, water resource specialists, water regulations personnel, aquatic plant specialists, and wildlife biologists collaborate to identify the existing critical habitat areas within and around a lake.

What data is gathered during a sensitive area survey?

Sensitive area surveys are comprehensive in nature. That means a lot of information is gathered in several categories: general information about the site and the primary reason/s for site designation; water quality attributes that the site offers; a detailed physical description of the site; information about the site's fishery and wildlife diversity; identification of the existing aquatic vegetation; a listing of the site specific management recommendations, as well as an evaluation of the site's status regarding water regulation laws.

Where may sensitive areas be found?

Sensitive area designations exist in a wide variety of locations within and around the shoreline of a lake. It's a good bet that areas around the shoreline rich in aquatic and wetland vegetation would be designated as a critical habitat area. This is because vegetation is so crucial to the healthy functioning of a lake ecosystem. There may be an area around the shoreline of a lake that offers a unique or endangered species. Again, chances are good that the area would be selected as sensitive. More and more, scientists are finding the benefits that large submersed wood (downed trees) offer to a lake's fishery and wildlife. This wood provides wonderful habitat for shade, protective cover for young fish, and a place for fish to feed on the invertebrates that flourish in this type of habitat. For these reasons alone, an area that contains downed woody structures would probably be cited as critical habitat. Shoreline areas that contain clean gravel as the dominant bottom type are likely to be important spawning sites for certain species of fish like walleye or bass. In the interest of protecting the natural reproduction requirements of these fish, a fishery biologist would select this type of area as sensitive. There may be certain locations on Wisconsin lakes that offer unique or beautiful historical, geological, and/or archaeological significance. Since we wouldn't want to jeopardize these types of sites in any way, they would likely be selected as a sensitive areas.

Who can use sensitive area surveys?

Lake organizations, existing and potential shoreland residents, historical preservation groups, town governments, aquatic plant managers, fishery managers, water regs personnel, county zoning personnel, and people involved in the preservation of endangered plants and animals can all utilize sensitive area survey data and reports.

How can sensitive area survey results be Used?

The results of this type of survey can be used in many different capacities. Lake organizations have used results for planning and decision making for lake management or protection projects, WDNR personnel use the results for permit decisions regarding shoreline modifications and aquatic plant management. Comprehensive survey results can also be used to spur lake stewardship activities or to provide a wealth of educational information about a specific lake.

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